



DEADLY MEATING

By Jacob Graysol

Hope took the ten-thousand-dollar down payment from the box and looked for the mark on the band. “5x” meant fifty thousand, her rate for a single hit with body disposal. “10x” covered complications or special requests. This one read “50x.”

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Hope parked at the North Hollywood Costclub, checked her wig, and put on oversized tortoise-shell sunglasses. As she approached the black Escalade, she recognized Eli Topalov of the Danube Syndicate. She climbed into the back seat and closed the door. “No, I won’t kill your boss and make it look like an accident, and I’m keeping the ten grand, for saving you from an agonizing death.” She grabbed the door handle to leave.

“That’s not what I want for Gregor. Something smarter. You’re the only freelancer I’d trust to think of everything.”

Hope crossed her arms and leaned back. “Go on.”

“I want him framed for murder.”

She stared at distant power lines slicing the sky. “I can’t keep Gregor from knowing he’s been set up, and he’ll assume it’s your doing.”

“Screw what he thinks; the half-million is to finesse it so nobody believes him. The charges have to stick, and you have to stomach whacking a civilian, not one of the bums on my list who deserve it.”

Hope thought for another minute, then nodded. “Oh, she deserves it.”

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Hope still reeked of aftershave. She rang Grace’s doorbell over and over, expecting her sister had whiskey for dinner. Sure enough, Grace fumbled with the locks to open the door, then leaned on the doorframe and struggled to focus.

“Time to settle up, Grace,” Hope said.

“I almost took care of that myself, yesterday.” Grace poked her temple with a finger gun and used her thumb to bring down the hammer. “It was the twentieth.”

“One year, seven months.”

“A long time to live with an accident like that.”

“Don’t call it an accident!” Hope balled her fists. “You were drunk behind the wheel, and now nothing can bring our parents back.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Then stop pretending you’re suffering more than me.”

Grace held up four fingers. “They upped my Klonopin to four milligrams. Everyone wants me alive and numb. Everyone but you. And myself.”

Hope took a deep breath. “Come on. I’m treating you to a steak dinner. You hump an old-school mobster, that’s what you get.”

“You’re not pimping me out!”

“Not you, Grace. Me. Eighty disgusting seconds.”

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Gregor screamed at his attorney. “I didn’t do anything to that slut!”

“The case file has—”

Gregor held up his hand. “Nothing illegal, I mean. She was out of her dress before I could even talk about dinner, and after we finished, I took her out.”

“You two going into The Tender Steer is on their security footage, and you leaving together.”

“Like I’ve been saying. And twenty people inside saw her devour a sirloin. After that, I drove her home—”

“Where they found her, skull cracked and hair matted in blood.”

“Having nothing to do with me. I dropped her three houses away. Some crap about a fundamentalist landlord.”

“Contradicted by the condom in her bedroom ... your DNA inside, hers outside.”

“We did it at my place. The freak must’ve fished it from the trash.”

The lawyer opened a folder. “Undigested beef in her stomach. Medical examiner reports she died early evening, about an hour after she ate ... when you admitted you were at her house.”

Gregor wagged his finger. “Uh-uh. Down the street.”

“Without proof. No credible alibi until two hours after the meal.”

“I should record my dates? This is ridiculous.” Gregor slammed the table. “And those anonymous tips. Somebody set me up.”

“The coroner?”

“Someone who’d benefit.... Eli Topalov.”

“Well, unless *Eli* plans to confess to murder, you either accept life without parole, or let a jury put you on death row. A paralegal huffing glue could beat me with this evidence.”

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Hope brushed sand off her feet and slid the glass door open. Raul yelled to his workers, “*Callense! Dama espejo!*” He turned to her. “The air conditioners are in. Sunny Costa Rica outside, cool and comfortable inside. You’ll love this house!”

“You’ve made everything so easy, Raul.” She scanned the half-dozen portraits on her walls, three landscapes, and the single mirror in the hallway. “What makes me *dama espejo*? ‘Mirror lady,’ right?”

He smiled and gestured to her only full-family photo, Grace and her with Mom and Dad in Maui, the picture she’d taken from Grace’s house. “I was nicknamed mirror boy,” he said. “I’m a twin, too.”

Originally published in *Yellow Mama*, Issue 102.

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